

The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

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Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

The Heart of Resilience: A Blessing, Key Questions and Core Beliefs

Return with me, if you will, to a Friday afternoon at the end of a three-day workshop. People are pumped with the adrenaline of new ideas, the room electric with fresh insight and lively intention. Likewise, they are exhausted from the calisthenics of the learning process, the focused attention and mental stretching it demands. On cue, they move away from the tables and circle their chairs as if around an imaginary fire. Shoes come off, legs are crossed, books and notebooks are strewn across the floor. The long-awaited stretch and deep breath ensues, as a collective sigh burst forth, settling like the last note of a song. This is how we have ended each of the three days, so by now, this is what we have come to expect – a hard-earned respite as a group before the eager exchange of handshakes, hugs, and high-fives.

But Day 3 is different. There is a different kind of energy in the room. While people are anxious to return to the comfort of home, they settle deep into their chairs, and a stillness takes hold. While I have been here many times before, I am never fully prepared for the onslaught (or should I say holy arrival) of the realization that prevails amongst us. It is this: We will never meet again, in this particular group, in this particular setting. With wide-eyed amazement, the circle is joined in simultaneous joy and sorrow that a community has banded together in three short days, strangers-turned-friends, only to soon go our own ways.

It is within this context that we begin the passing of my colorful, handwoven Chilean "training ball" – the holder of which is invited to share what they taken from the course, and their wish for their colleagues as they return to their respective workplaces. Their offerings vary from short and sweet to long and lengthy; some

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pithy, others philosophical – each holding the rapt attention of the circle. One admits that she came burned out but can feel the fire back in her belly. Another announces that she can no longer put her dreams on hold. Some speak of tolerance and patience, others of compassion in the service of their customers. There's the discussion of deeper partnerships with employers, visions for creating opportunities, and plans to revamp job search workshops. Wishes are expressed for everything from good fortune, health, and happiness, to renewed contracts, expanded training budgets, less paperwork, and a safe drive home.

The last of the group is about to speak. She bears a regal presence, adorned in a gold, red and black African caftan, a tight swoop of braids upon her head like a crown, and a thick strand of amber beads around her neck. Her eyes shimmer and shine as she passes her gaze around the circle, pausing just long enough to put us on edge. And then, in that rare strain of voice that is equal parts commanding and consoling, deep in tone but soft in delivery, she offers what can only be characterized as a blessing. She speaks slowly, making each word count, taking a deep breath between each sentence.

"I wish for you what I wish for myself. I wish you the sturdiness of great mountains. I wish you the ability to bend like trees in fierce storms. I wish you the grace of flowing rivers. I wish you open hearts, bright minds, and great courage. As you stumble, may you rise. Be a faithful steward of your gifts. And may your journey, always, in the direction of your hope."

Rendered speechless, I was stunned by the beauty of her words. Who talks like that? I was reminded of the words of Thomas Paine: "Do not believe that all of the sages and saints have gone before you. They are right there, among you." Indeed. I must admit, I live for these moments - when we slip below the surface of our polite and pedestrian selves, and dive into the depths of things. When we take off our masks, put down our armor, and speak heart to heart. These moments cannot be planned, any more than we can schedule a meteor shower or a double rainbow. But when it happens, it's magic. But I digress. Returning to the training room. 4:30, Friday, Day 3, Holiday Inn.

The room is scintillating with energy and emotion. You could hear a pin drop. Some in the circle are holding their breath, some stare wide-eyed, and others wipe tears from their eyes. They turn to me, awaiting response. I remove my glasses, and rub my hands over my eyes and down my chin. Bending forward in my chair, I cock my head towards the bestower of this beautiful blessing, and reply in street-tone: "Say Wat?"

A second or two passes before the circle erupts into laughter, as do the queen and I, which quickly evolves into a collective fit of hilarity. People are hugging each

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other, a few lay down on the floor as if bowled over, others are high-fiving their neighbor. Everyone is sucked into the emotional vortex. Our every attempt to regain composure is usurped by wave after wave of side-splitting laughter. (It's one of those times when you had to be there, but you know what I'm talking about.) Perhaps it was the combination of our exhaustion, our elevated emotions, and the sublime elocution of a most unexpected and elegant blessing that created the conditions for a perfect storm, but if laughter is medicine, we were cured of all maladies two lifetimes over.

My take on this experience is that someone spoke to the heart of what mattered, there was a readiness for those words to be heard, and the truth simply undid us:

We have big work to do and that work is hard. We want to change the world. We have big ideas and inspired notions. We are about to leave the comfort of one another's company and head back into the wide world. We will meet storms. We will stumble and fall. Give us sturdiness of mountains, flexibility of trees, and grace of rivers. Lend us hope. Make us resilient.

I once read a story of a priest who was about to give a sermon to his congregation when a small bird flew onto the sill of an open window of the church. The small bird offered a song. It chirped and tweeted and whistled its little heart out, then flew off. The priest turned from the congregation and said, "Enough said for today," and promptly dismissed them.

While I typically end a seminar with a few thoughts, a story, and/or a poem, that day I was able to recognize a sermon when I heard one. Once we had regained our faculties, I simply bowed to her, I bowed to the circle, and was the first to stand in what became a rousing ovation for her, for the circle, and for our faith in our own and in one another's resilience.

Questions at the Heart of Resilience

In the weeks and months that ensued, I followed the thread of that profound blessing to uncover the following questions which I believe lie at the heart of resilience:

- With so much and so many vying for our attention, how do we stay focused on what is important? In the midst of those who would urge us to give up, surrender the cause, or to cease tilting at windmills, how do we remain steadfast in our own sense of purpose, embodying the sturdiness of mountains?

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- When our best efforts are not bringing us the results we want, in the time that we want them, how do we continue to keep on keeping on with the grace of flowing rivers, keeping our eyes on the goal, like rivers heading to the sea?
- When the going gets tough, how do we fight off feelings of lethargy and sluggishness and bring, instead, fresh energy and renewed commitment like the tree withstanding fierce storms year after year, only to become more deeply-rooted and blossom again and again?
- How do we transcend the weight of our worries and the gravity of the daily grind in order to bring open hearts, bright minds, and great courage?
- How do we meet defeat without being defeated, so that as we stumble, we are quick to rise?
- How do we remain faithful stewards of our gifts, investing our time, energy and attention with utmost care and concern?
- When cynicism and fear come knocking, how do we refuse them entry, enlisting the company of optimism and faith so that we may journey in the direction of hope?

In my mind, these are universal questions lying at the heart of any worthwhile goal, whether imposed by the demands of the job, dictated by the needs of the family, or inspired by our own heart's desire. These are the kind of questions that, as poet David Whyte would say, "deserve to never go away".

Core Beliefs

It was with the wresting of these questions that I created The Resilience Series, a four-part webinar that I delivered in the spring of 2015. With the gift of time and distance, I now recognize with fresh eyes some of the key principles and overriding tenets that informed that body of work, although I never spoke to these directly in the series. With humility and joy, I invite you to peruse and explore the Eight Core Beliefs that reflect my current understanding relating to the all-important aim of recognizing, embracing, and strengthening our resilience in the important work that we do. I urge you to not take them at face value, but to put them to the test by reflecting on your current and past experiences of resilience in both your personal and professional life.

- **Resilience means different things in different contexts.** For the night-watch security guard it means staying awake, while for the marathon runner

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it means making the mile. For our purposes, and in the context of the work in our field, here is what I would consider a comprehensive definition of resilience: The capability and strength to give our daily best while productively dealing with ongoing change, responding quickly to people in unpredictable circumstances, bouncing back from ongoing rejection and adversity, and managing periods of stress due to big caseloads and/or high performance standards, while staying cool, calm, collected, and inspired, in the process. (Note: there are arenas in which the “inspired” word would not show up as part and parcel of resilience, but in the field of employment and training, I hope you’ll agree, it’s pivotal to the work we do.)

- **We were born to bounce back.** While the preceding paragraph might cause some to shake in their boots, somewhere deep insides we know “we’ve got this.” We are predisposed to resilience, hard-wired with a certain hardiness. Flexibility, buoyancy and elasticity are part and parcel of our physical and spiritual DNA. If we weren’t made to bounce back, we would never have learned to walk, talk, swim, ride a bike, or use the TV controller. Without resilience in our very bones, we would never heal from heart attacks or from heartbreak, from broken legs or broken contracts, from personal depression or depressed economies. Resilience is what makes growth and change possible in our physical bodies, personal relationships, careers and work lives, spiritual pursuits, and community endeavors. Resilience: never leave home without it.
- **We each rock impressive Resumes of Resilience!** Not only do we know that resilience is in the repertoire of our species, it can account for almost everything we have ever earned, done, accomplished, learned, acquired, developed and experienced throughout our lives. Everything we are and have achieved has tested our resilience in some way, shape or form. Wouldn’t it be cool to draft resumes of your resilience – all the times you wanted to quit and didn’t; the times you took the risk of learning or relating to something/someone new; the times you fell, mistakes you made, lessons you learned that you wouldn’t trade for all the world; the times you went the distance in anything that mattered more than your comfort in the situation? Good luck following the ‘one-page rule’ for that kind of resume!
- **Resilience is more of a choice than a capacity.** Just because we were gifted the inborn potential for resiliency, doesn’t mean we don’t have to work it. Not unlike having the inherent potential for increased muscle mass; without a regimen of exercising of our muscles, they atrophy. It is only by consciously choosing to bounce back, move forward, or hang in do we

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engage our capacities for resilience. Like a muscle, the more we exercise our resilience, the more resilient we become. It's the old "Use it or lose it" thing.

- **Resilience is situational.** We may be resilient in the face of one person's disapproval, but crumble at the hint of criticism from another. Just because we are resilient on the home front doesn't mean we are resilient at work. We may withstand the storms of change with a financial investment, but fall apart when short-changed \$20 at the supermarket. Our capacity for resilience wavers from circumstance to circumstance, just as our proclivity for patience or tolerance waxes and wanes. The question we need to ask is: In what aspect or circumstance of my life do I desire to exercise more resilience? In what part of my job am I being called to *practice* more resilience?
- **Resilience is entirely an inside-job.** Taking a closer look at the examples above, one thing is perfectly clear – you cannot mandate or decree resilience any more than you can mandate love, generosity or kindness. The kinds of thought patterns, skillsets and habits we are talking about are, by nature, self-motivated, self-organized, and self-regulated. Turns out the picture of Resilience is the ultimate "selfie."
- **Resilience is not a single capacity, but an alchemy of elements.** Much of the research on resilience attempts to identify its anatomy, the elements which contribute to the response of being resilient. Feel free to knock yourself out perusing the many studies, as I did, on my relentless hunt for the Holy Grail of resilience. Spoiler alert – it doesn't exist. What you *will* find is an abundance of models and theories, each focused on their own very particular area of interest. Resilient communities bouncing back from natural disasters; resilient neighborhoods dealing with the aftermath of gang violence; Resilience in pre-schoolers who miss their mommies – you name it. But what the results of these varied and sundry research projects have in common was this: every item on their respective lists fell into one of three categories: *Attitudes/Mindsets; Skillsets/Coping Mechanisms; and Habits/Lifestyle*. Here are examples of the kinds of things listed under each of these categories:

Attitudes/Mindsets: Optimism, Gratitude, Causal Analysis, Self-belief, Adaptability, Sense of Humor, Openness to Change, Mindfulness, Action-orientation

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Skillsets/Coping Mechanisms: Communication skills, Connection with Others, Ability to ask for and accept help, Problem-solving, Impulse Control, Ability to focus

Habits/Lifestyle: Adequate sleep, nutrition and exercise; Energy conservation; Management of one's time; Personal and Professional Goal-setting; Spiritual practices; Time in nature; Regular periods of recreation; Time with loved ones

Clearly, resilience is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted, operating on physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels. We typically think of resilience as simply a matter. However, the readiness, strength and sustainability of that will emanates from how we think, perceive and engage with the world.

- **More than anything, resilience is a matter of spirit.** The experience that the word "resilience" attempts to label is innate, natural and idiosyncratic to every person, conjuring images that are too personal to ever fit into a common lexicon. What images does the word "resilience" invoke for you? Packing up what was salvaged in the ashes of a fire, in the ravages of divorce, or in the wake of a down-sizing? Facing up to childhood abuse, a problem with gambling, or the need to file bankruptcy? Standing up to a maniacal boss, a crooked landlord, or a system of injustice? Speaking up for your right to marry, the need for financial backing, or permission to voice your opinion? Notice that the crux of resilience in these images shines in the action words "pack up", "face up", "stand up", "speak up", rather than the circumstance that calls upon this response. Resilience is all about what it calls up in the human spirit.

I leave you now with a borrowed blessing. While I often include a Poetic Reflection as part of my newsletters, I do believe this is poem enough.

"I wish for you what I wish for myself. I wish you the sturdiness of great mountains. I wish you the ability to bend like trees in fierce storms. I wish you the grace of flowing rivers. I wish you open hearts, bright minds, and great courage. As you stumble, may you rise. Be a faithful steward of your gifts. And may your journey, always, in the direction of your hope."

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THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER 

“To be alive, fully human
Is to be continually thrown
Out of the nest.”

- Pema Chodron

“A good half of the art of living is Resilience.”

- Alain de Botton

“Stand Tall
Fearlessly stick your neck out.
Reach for new heights.
Dress with flair.
Listen with your heart.”

Giraffe Blessing

“You must face annihilation over and over again
To find what is indestructible in yourself.”

- Pema Chodron

“Darwin was on to something when he asserted that
those who survive are not necessarily
the strongest or the most intelligent,
but the most adaptable to change.”

- Maya Angelou

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. Share this article with your staff, co-workers, or clientele and use these questions for discussion afterwards:
 - What images does the word "resilience" conjure up in your mind?
 - What would you include in your own Resume of Resilience?
 - What questions do you believe live at the heart of resilience?
 - In what part of your life is resilience being summoned?
 - What are some of your own core beliefs regarding resilience?
2. Consider meeting with staff, coworkers, or clientele for a brown bag lunch once a week for four weeks, using [The Resilience Series](#) webinars as a training tool. Begin each subsequent week with a report on how they have utilized the webinar handouts. Alternatively, invite staff or coworkers to dig up their own resources, articles, videos, etc., on the theme of Resilience, taking turns presenting and sharing what they have found.
3. In the spirit of a Resilience Project, invite stories and examples from staff, coworkers and/or clientele, and consider putting together a videotape, or holding an event in which individuals share their stories. Nothing inspires hope and resilience more readily than seeing and hearing examples of it from the people around us!

The Resilience Series and Future Projects

Last year I had the opportunity to develop a four-part webinar entitled *The Resilience Series* which has just been made available for [on-demand viewing](#). Given the sweeping, all-encompassing scope of what comes together and manifests as Resilience, expressed uniquely and idiosyncratically by every person depending upon the situation, one might wonder how to begin developing a training module on such an elusive subject? For purposes of the Resilience Series, in which I had four one-hour webinars, I honed in on the following sub-topics that I felt I could do justice to within that time frame and that would be most germane to the challenges and issues facing employment and training professionals. Within each webinar I offer suggestions of attitudes/mindsets, skillsets/capacities and habits/lifestyles leading to and strengthening our resilience, along with practical handouts that can be used with clientele with the goal of strengthening their resilience. Here are the four one-hour topics:

- Making the Most of Your Time and Getting the Best from Your Energy
- Responding Well to Feedback and Dealing with Challenges
- The Five Essential Roles of Self-Care
- Thinking Abundance in Difficult Times: Ten Powerful Shifts in Mindset

As is often the case, I would have loved twice the time for each of those topics, and have since developed a two-day course on Strengthening Resilience, based on the content of the webinar series. I also look forward to exploring additional sub-topics, perhaps even in articles for this newsletter, which will include:

- Developing a Network of Role Models for Inspiration and Resiliency
- Strengthening Resilience through Mindfulness Practices
- Creating Resumes of Resilience
- Giving and Receiving Help: Cornerstones of Resilience
- Recognizing and Strengthening our Natural Coping Mechanisms